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UN at 40: redesigning a peace machine

ADLAI Stevenson said that if the United Nations didn't exist, we would have to invent it. That's catchy. And probably true. But it mistakes today's problem.

The UN already exists. But the world also needs to reinvent it. And it's much harder to recreate something that's already there.

Tomorrow marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the UN in San Francisco. In a year devoted to massive remembrances of the end of World War II (with more to come in August for Hiroshima and V.J.-Day), relatively little attention has been paid to the other half of what was accomplished by the victorious Allies in 1945.

Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman, and Eisenhower understood the interconnection of the three great events of 1945: (1) the end of the biggest, most devastating war in history; (2) the advent of the nuclear weapons age, and (3) the founding of the UN and its sister agencies to keep the peace.

But by the 1960s the assembly of nations was changing. It became more universal, less a power center for the big players on the scene. And as it changed, so did other parts of the equation.

First, the generation that created the UN and understood both its usefulness and its urgency gave way to a new generation. Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN secretary-general, died in a mysterious plane crash. He seemed almost an Icarus figure, who had flown too close to the sun. The Congo peacekeeping operation he oversaw as his last duty was the most ambitious UN policing job and one which ended in tilting future UN administrations toward caution.

At the same time, the area of peace refereeing in which the UN had been in many ways most successful — the Mideast — underwent a metamorphosis of image from dove to albatross. Israel, whose founding the

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UN had midwived and whose boundaries its international peace troops had patrolled, began to criticize the world body for anti-Israeli rhetoric. The United States, increasingly a mentor of Israel, found its attitude changing, first to apathy then to scolding.

The Vietnam war played a role in changing popular perceptions in the US. It pitted superpower interests directly against each other once more. This left formal UN peacekeeping efforts stymied. And the American public found it hard to understand this apparent inaction in the face of national anguish. The S-G's office on the 38th floor in New York worked on many Vietnam peace proposals. (As the S-G does today for Afghanistan, Cyprus, Cambodia, Iran-Iraq, and other conflicts.) But that action rarely hits the headlines or even the 27th minute of the nightly news.

In a way the US was spoiled. For the first 15 years, the UN was a relatively small but powerful club. Washington ran most of the show. Americans were proud of the fact that US ambassadors didn't even have to use their veto — as the Russians perpetually did and British and French occasionally did.

But tripled UN membership, an expanded Security Council, and gradual leveling of preeminent US power in the world both brought on American vetoes and lessened American interest.

Staffers at the United Nations Association of the USA (a citizen support group) are concerned about rising membership age and inability to attract young members. The same is true of other nations' groups.

In short, two generations after the first nuclear bombings and the founding of an apparatus to keep

the peace, the new generation seems to have remembered the bomb and forgotten the peacekeeper.

Should anything be done about this? If so, what?

The answer to the first question is an unequivocal

